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ABSTRACT

This study investigated international student adjustment issues and needed social support. Data were obtained from individual interviews with 10 international students at The Ohio State University. Results indicate that international students experience significant problems in their coping with U.S. education, cultural differences, and language challenges. Friends and family were the most preferred resources to seek help. Providing academic orientation, improving student counseling, and strengthening language support for international students are vital for the successful adjustment of international students at U.S. universities. (Contains 1 table and 22 references.) (Author/SLD)

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Studying International Students: Adjustment Issues and Social Support

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Studying International Students: Adjustment Issues and Social Support

Abstract: *This study investigated international student adjustment issues and needed social support. Data were obtained from individual interviews. Results indicated that international students experienced significant problems in their coping with U.S education, cultural differences, and language challenges. Friends and family were most preferred resources to seek help. Providing academic orientation, improving student counseling, and strengthening language support for international students are vital for the successful adjustment of international students at U.S. universities .*

Introduction

In recent years, U.S. colleges and universities have witnessed a steady increase in international student enrollment. According to *Open Doors 2000*, the number of international students studying in the United States grew sharply during the 1999/2000 academic year (Davis, 2001). The total of 514,723 international students in 2001 represents 3.8% of the overall U.S. higher education student population, an increase of 4.8% over enrollment for 2000. International students constituted 12% of U.S. graduate enrollment in the year 1999-2000 (Davis, 2001). The advantages of international students attending U.S. higher education have been widely recognized. For instance, three quarters (74.7%) of all international students received most of their funding for U.S. study from sources outside the United States (Davis, 2001). The economic impact of their presence was responsible for $12.3 billion to the U.S. economy or one million jobs in the United States (Davis, 2001; Desruisseaux, 1996). In addition, international students offered an important diversity of viewpoints to the student body and helped

offset a declining U.S. applicant pool in certain disciplines (Wan, Chapman & Biggs, 1992).

The growing number of international students enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities each year called attention to provide special services to help international students adjust to the host culture and solve various problems (Boyer & Sedlacek, 1986). Although research found international students to have strong academic skills, high educational aspirations, and positive attitudes toward their school, other scholars believed that international students faced many difficulties in their adjustment to higher education in the United States (Boyer& Sedlacek, 1986). In addition to academic pressures shared with U.S. students, students from other countries studying in the United States had the stress of living in an unfamiliar culture (Reinicke, 1986). Mallinckrodt and Leong (1992) also noted that many international students experienced significant problems in adjusting to life in the United States, including difficulty with English language proficiency, insufficient financial resources, social integration, problems in daily life tasks, homesickness, and role conflicts. These problems could be manifested as social withdrawal, inability to sleep well, sadness and depression, academic problems, and loss of self-esteem (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992). Therefore, helping international students successfully adjust to U.S. culture and higher education should not be ignored.

Although some research on the needs and services of international students was conducted, most of the research was insufficient and usually quite limited in scope (Parr.G., Bradley & Bingi, R., 1992). Therefore, in order for colleges and universities to understand problems international students face after they came to the United States and assist them in their academic pursuit, more research needs to be conducted to determine

adjustment issues and identify needed support services. By gaining this information, educators will be able to counsel individuals experiencing such stress, to take institutional actions to help alleviate the sources of the stress, and to prepare incoming international students to better handle the pressures they are likely to encounter (Wan et al, 1992).

As a means of addressing this issue, this qualitative exploratory study was conducted in hopes of identifying international students' adjustment issues and help-seeking behaviors while attending U.S. higher education. This study reviewed previous studies and identified major difficulties that international students encountered after arriving the United States. Furthermore, this study also sought to determine the effective support services to assist international students in making better transitions to U.S. life and education. Conclusions, discussions, and implications for practitioners were also provided.

Review of Literature

For most international students, entering U.S. universities and colleges can be an overwhelming life and cultural transition. English language proficiency was widely recognized as one of the major adjustment issues for international student (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992; Constantinides, 1992; Antwi and Ziyati, 1993; Wan et al, 1992; Surdam & Collins, 1984; Chen, 1996). These studies found that international students encountered great problems in communicating with others in English especially in academic settings. Most of these difficulties were due to differences in accent, enunciation, slang, and use of special English words (Sandhu, 1991).

Wan et al (1992) and Constantinides (1992) found that the stress experienced by international students tended to center on academic situations. The authors indicated that

international students often found their academic experiences to be extremely stressful. Academic demands were heavy, instructor-student interaction was often fast-paced, and the academic and social support mechanisms available to international undergraduate students often were not as relevant or as available to graduate students (Wan et al, 1992).

In addition to changes associated with language issues and academic concerns, international students were often faced with the need to adjust to a variety of cultural and social changes as well. Several researchers (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992; Sandhu et al, 1991; Parr et al, 1992) found that many international students experienced significant problems in social integration, isolation, financial crisis, and family stress. Although international students were seen to be a resilient group, homesickness and loneliness were pervasive, and depression is common (Parr et al, 1992). Irritability, excessive concern with health, distrust and hostility towards members of the host culture, depression, and lowered work performance were common symptoms of the cultural shock that international students experienced (Parr et al, 1992).

Antwi and Ziyati (1993) assumed that the lives of international students outside their home countries and cultures were communication-based experiences. Findings revealed that the existence of a number of obstacles and barriers that made interaction and understanding difficult among different cultures. These barriers and obstacles included intense feelings of isolation, loneliness, and frustration. Chen (1996) explained that loneliness of international students was likely because they had no time to make new friends due to a heavy load of academic work and the limitation of language.

International students help-seeking behavior is another interesting topic that was explored by many researchers. There was some inconsistence and debate over this issue.

Some researchers believed that student counseling was one of the most important services for international students (Johnson, 1993; Dalili, 1982). Others (Schneider & Spinler, 1986; Surdam & Collins, 1984) argued that the use of student services by international students was infrequent and friends, parents, and relatives were consistently preferred help sources. Most of the students preferred to keep their problems to themselves or ask friends and relatives for advice because they did not think the international student services staff were knowledgeable about their problems (Schneider & Spinler, 1986; Johnson, 1993).

In summary, language and communication related problems were seen as one of the most tough challenges for international students during their adjustment period. Coping with cultural differences and academic demanding were also identified as the important adjustment issues for international students. There was some argument and inconsistence about international students' using of student services and help-seeking behaviors.

Methods

This study is a qualitative research. Data were collected via individual interviews with 10 international students at The Ohio State University (OSU). The following four questions are developed to guide the interviews:

1. What are the most important adjustment problems you encountered after you came to the United States? Please list two.
2. What are your most frequently used resources to get help?
3. Have you ever used student services provided by the university? If yes, what kind? If no, why?

4. What do you think your college or department should do to help international students make better adjustment?

In order to obtain a wide range of viewpoints and perspectives from international students, some demographic variables were controlled. The students represented different countries and regions: Indonesia, Pakistan, United Kingdom, German, Korea, Tanzania, Venezuela, Brazil, Taiwan, and China. Among the 10 students, there were five males and five females, five were married and five were single. The average age of this group was 33 years. All ten students were graduate students, four pursuing Master's degree and six were pursuing a doctoral degree. All of them had been the United States more than one year. Students were interviewed during fall 1999 at The Ohio State University. The interviews were conducted in classrooms, offices, or student homes in a non-formal setting. Each interview lasted about 30 minutes and students were asked the same set of questions. Data gathered from the interviews were transcribed and a content analysis was performed.

Results

Data obtained from interviews were analyzed using content analysis and results were summarized below:

Question 1. What are the most important adjustment problems after you came to the United States? Please list two.

International students' adjustment issues are summarized in Table 1. All students experienced significant difficulties during their early adjustment stage including educational system differences, cultural differences, language challenges, food incompatibilities, living practicalities, time management, and social integration.

Adjustment to the U.S education system (50%), cultural differences (50%), and language challenges (50%) were the three most profound issues for international students. Adjustment to U.S higher education tended to be the most difficult challenge that international students encountered. Students indicated that studying in the U.S was much more stressful than that of their home country due to the different teaching methods, fast-paced class session, two-way interaction with professors in the classroom, more student participation in the class, more classroom and group activities, more reading and writing assignments, more presentation and speech requirements, and more after class studying. More importantly, most international students did not anticipate these academic differences before they came to the U.S. so they were extremely overwhelmed during their early adjustment period.

According to the students, the major cultural conflict between U.S. and students' home country was the contradiction between individualism vs. collectivism. Most students in this study were brought up and educated in a collective culture where people were closer and friendlier with each other; therefore, they found it was very difficult to make friends in the United States. The impact of this cultural difference was their feeling of isolation from U.S. culture and people.

Several student also reported problems with their English skills; however, most of them expected this challenge before they came to the U.S., therefore, it was not as intense as coping with the academic differences. Interestingly, two of the students considered U.S. food as one of the most important adjustment problems.

Question 2. What are your most frequently used resources to get help?

This group of international students reported that they approached their friends or family, Office of International Education, academic adviser or faculty, classmates, and colleagues for advice regarding their personal problems and issues. The results showed that family or friends were the most preferred resource (70%) to seek help (see Table 1). Students reported that their extended family included their fellow international students or other international students. They felt very connected with their fellow international students and very isolated from U.S. students. Only two of the students indicated that they had regular interaction with U.S. students.

Question 3. Have you ever used student services provided by the university? If yes, what kind? If no, why?

International students used five student services: Office of International Education (OIE), counseling, student organizations, sport clubs, and career services. OIE was most frequently used (90%) service (See Table 1). Overall, OIE staff were seen as helpful, caring, and knowledgeable by this group. However, all the students indicated that they went to the OIE for help with visas, traveling, legal problems, or financial difficulties. One student commented that the OIE was a place to get help for administrative problems. For emotional and psychological problems, international students indicated that they would rather go to friends and family. Another student expressed that although OIE staff cared about international students and showed personal interest in them, they seemed all very busy with immigration matters and had no time to discuss the personal concerns. Only one of the students used the counseling service. Most of the students in this group claimed they were not aware of the availability of this services.

Question 4. What do you think your college or department should do to help international students make better adjustment?

Students suggested that it would be very helpful if their college and department provide orientation programs for international students addressing academic and cultural differences (see Table 1). Additionally, students also suggested that the colleges and departments should make better connections with OIE so as to serve them better. Activities to increase interaction between international and U.S. students were strongly recommended. Meeting with each faculty member one-on-one, ESL tutoring programs, and adding international perspectives to curriculum were also important.

Conclusions and Discussion

1. International Students Adjustment Issues

Results of this study showed that adjustment to the U.S. educational system, cultural differences, and language challenge were the three most significant issues for international students. These finding are consistent with the conclusions of Constantinides (1992) and Parr et al (1992). Constantinides (1992) believed that cultural and educational system differences presented international students with new and difficult situations. Parr et al (1992) also reported that the students' concerns regarding cultural differences seemed to focus on aspects of the U.S. culture such as competitiveness, individualism, and assertiveness. Language proficiency was the most frequently investigated adjustment issue by many researchers (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992; Constantinides, 1992; Antwi & Ziyati, 1993; Wan et al, 1992; Surdam &Collins, 1984; Chen, 1996).

It was interesting to ascertain the areas in which the 10 students did not exhibit many concerns. They expressed little concern about social integration, time management, and living practicalities. Social integration was explored in several studies (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992; Chen, 1996; Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1991; Cho, 1988). However, only one of the students claimed social integration was an important adjustment issue. This group of students showed no concern about financial difficulties, homesickness, and health issues which were examined in several previous studies.

2. International Students Help-Seeking Behavior

Results of this study indicated that family or friends were the most preferred resource to get advice on solving personal problems. This study appears to lend further support to studies conducted by Schneider and Spinler (1986) and Johnson (1993) where they found that friends, parents, and relatives were consistently preferred help sources for personal issues. Most of the students in this study stated that they usually consulted their fellow international students regarding their personal concerns because their fellow international students spoke the same language, shared the same culture, and had the similar adjustment issues; therefore, were the best people to obtain advice.

Results of the study also confirmed that the OIE was the most frequently used student service only for visa, traveling, legal problems, or financial difficulties, but not for personal emotional issues. In general, international students did not frequently use student services. Only one student had used the student counseling while most others were not aware of this service. The underutilization of student services by international students is not surprising. Several researchers have confirmed this trend, especially with regard to personal counseling services (Surdam & Collins, 1984; Johnson, 1993).

Surdam and Collins (1984) found that most international students were unlikely to use formal counseling services. Sandhu et al (1991) explained that most of the international students were from underdeveloped or developing countries where such professional counseling services were not practiced or not normally available. Therefore, students from these countries are not familiar with counseling service, in consequence, they are unlikely to use it. In addition, although student counseling services are designed to serve all students, not all counselors are trained to serve the specific needs of international students. Therefore, international students may not trust the counselors and may question their ability to solve their personal problems. Furthermore, because of cultural differences, it is difficult for many international students to open their hearts and share their personal concerns with someone they do not know very well. Johnson (1993) also confirmed that some reasons for the underutilization of counseling services by international students was lack of awareness, trust, confidentiality, and perceptions of staff incompetence.

3. Support for International Students

International students recommended that their colleges or departments should provide orientation programs for international students addressing academic and cultural differences. Academic and cultural differences were identified as two of the most important adjustment issues; therefore, designing orientation programs to address these issues would be helpful to them. In addition, students also suggested that the college or department should enhance interaction between international students and U.S. students through various student activities.

Recommendations

The main purpose of the study was to identify international students' adjustment issues and the types of social support that was most helpful to them. While acknowledging that all international students will suffer from various adjustment problems, whether they are academic, cultural or language-related, there is much that institutions can do to provide support and advice during the early adjustment period. As a result of the study, university staff responsible for the international student programs should work together to address the specific concerns that were raised by international students. It is recommended that colleges and universities implement the following support services and practices in assisting international students:

1. Stressing Academic Orientation

International students, after arriving in the new environment of the university, need special care and, sometimes, immediate help in order to be introduced successfully to U.S. higher education (Dalili, 1982). It is important, then, for student service and university counseling staff to make contact with students at the beginning of their programs to try to divert potential problems (Huntley, 1993). Providing informative orientation would be an effective strategy. A well- organized orientation can also help international students become aware of aspects of university life and then make better adjustment. In planning orientation programs for international students, university personnel should recognize that academic achievement is the highest priority for most international students. Therefore, discussing academic demands in U.S. classrooms should be one of the major components in the orientation programs.

Orientation is a continuous process requiring contact with students before they arrive and during their stay (Pedersen, 1991). Dalili (1982) suggested that information about United States education, both qualitative and quantitative, must be made more readily available to prospective foreign students before they leave their home countries so that they can be prepared or at least be aware of the differences before coming.

2. Improving Student Counseling

Like most of the other minorities in America, international students did not have a history of seeking out professional counselors or openly sharing their feelings with strangers (Sandhu et al, 1991). The present research confirmed that many international students were not aware of many services available to them. Under these circumstances, it is important that the counselors take initiative to find out if international students need any help and make better connections with the OIE to serve this group of students. To encourage international students to use counseling service, counseling services could take on a variety of forms. Pedersen (1991) presented an alternative scenario of providing counseling services to international students--an informal setting, such as hallways, homes, or street corners and informal methods, such as presentations, discussions, or daily encounters which might not be perceived as counseling according to standardized models (Cited by Sandhu et al, 1991).

Findings of the study revealed that OIE advisers are the most trusted university staff for international students. So, it is recommended that international student advisers in OIE should provide advising and counseling to help international students deal with the cultural shock and adjustment to the U.S. education.

3. Strengthening Language Support

Though most international students did show proficiency in written and comprehension English when they were admitted to the United States colleges and universities, they face a number of difficulties when they had to communicate orally in an academic setting. It would certainly help if "conversation partners" programs are available to more international students. It may also be helpful for OIE to organize mini-communication workshops as a part of orientation programs. In these workshops, international students may become familiar with the use of colloquial English, commonly used slang words, social and the cultural mores of U.S. society to communicate effectively both in the academic and non-academic settings (Sandhu, 1991).

Although most universities offer written and spoken ESL classes for all international students whose native language is not English, it seems that this type of language program often fails to adequately help students to make better transition to U.S. life. Therefore, it would be certainly helpful for ESL departments to integrate cultural and academic orientation information into their classes. Robinson (1992) suggested that by making the implicit cultural knowledge explicit in their instruction and providing opportunities to develop essential skills for university work, ESL practitioners can empower international students to develop necessary skills and knowledge for their academic pursuits.

4. Interacting with U.S. Students

Results of this study revealed that international students felt very isolated from U.S. students and culture. Therefore, creating programs to bridge international and U.S. students is highly recommended. Interaction with U.S. students can not only improve international students' language and intercommunication skills, but also provide them

opportunities to understand and adjust to U.S. culture. Previous research discovered that international students who spent more of their leisure time with U.S. students were significantly better adapted than those who spent more leisure time with their fellow citizens (Surdam & Collins, 1984). At the same time, U.S. students' experience of people who are culturally and linguistically different may teach them cross-cultural skills which are very important in today's diverse society. A variety of programs can be designed to bring to the same end, such as English conversation partner program, culture clubs, and international festivals.

In conclusion, providing social support in assisting international students making successful life transition is an important issue that warrants further attention. Not only is the social support crucial for the positive well-being of international students, but social support also provides a powerful coping resource for persons experiencing stressful life changes (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992). OIE may be the first place to go for most international students with problems, but it is certainly not the only resource. Wan et al (1992) found that students who believed they had a stronger social support network perceived themselves to be more capable of coping with stressful academic situations. Therefore, universities may ease international students' adjustment through assistance in establishing these social support networks.

Given the great connection students have with their extended family, perhaps OIE could increase their efforts to promote contact among fellow international students. Students who came to U.S. earlier may have the potential to become effective peer helpers. Having their senior fellow international students discuss successful methods for coping with cultural and academic differences might enhance preparation.

It is also essential that international students be informed of the student services and other sources available to them. However, student service staff should be aware that even when social support services are made available to them, international students often fail to take advantage of these programs because of cultural differences, academic pressure, and isolation from the campus community. Therefore, institutions of higher education must be persistent to reaching out these international students (Wan et al, 1992).

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Table 1. Content Analysis Themes (N=10)

Adjustment Issues	Frequency	Percent (%)
U.S. educational system differences	5	50%
Cultural differences	5	50%
Language challenges	5	50%
Food	2	20%
Living practicalities	1	10%
Time management	1	10%
Social integration	1	10%
Resources for Help		
Friends or family	7	70%
Office of International Education	3	30%
Academic adviser	2	20%
Classmates	2	20%
Faculty member	1	10%
Colleague	1	10%
Student Service Usage		
Office of International Education	9	90%
Counseling	1	10%
Student organizations	1	10%
Sport clubs	1	10%
Career services	1	10%
Recommendations		
Academic orientation	6	60%
Cultural orientation	6	60%
Better connections with OIE	2	20%
Interaction with US students	1	10%
Formally meet faculty one on one	1	10%
ESL tutoring program	1	10%
International perspectives added to curriculum	1	10%

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